

## Objectified Migrant Identity Through Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis

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### Abstract

*The images of migrants have inundated our media lately. However, migrant representation has been largely done through the lens of 'others', mostly by the foreign-media, whereas the discourse on the localized version of reality is unaccounted for. This search for self-narrative led us to the analysis of photographic work of Aziz Hazara, an Afghan student of Fine Arts, who envisions migrants as equal to the 'made-to-migrate', 'used' and sometimes even 'deformed' toys from the flea market. The article highlights the portrayal and identity construction of migrants through the lens of an Afghan visual artist by excavating the discourse informing the analogy between the toys and the migrants along with the application of Paul Gee's identity tool. A multimodal critical discourse analysis of the data reveals that toys ventrilocate the condition of the migrants characterized by deformity, subversion, and discontentment.*

### Key Words

Afghan Migrants, Identity, MCDA, Toys.

### Introduction

The images of migrants (Afghans, Syrians, Eritreans, Somalians, etc.) have inundated our face book walls, newspapers and other media for the last few years. On the one hand these images represent death, suffering, torture, and deportation (Mazzara, 2016), on the other hand, the migrants surface as perpetrators (Boeva, 2016) and desperate and supposedly dangerous invaders who are out to subvert 'the order of well-delimited and protected national spaces' (Mazzara, 2016). They are recurrently viewed as an 'other' (McIver, 2017). However, this representation has been largely done through the lens of foreign media while migrants' own voice and self-projection are mostly ignored (Gillespie et al, 2016). In this era of large-scale migration, a great deal of research has been done on migration crisis, and construction of migrant's images and identities resulting in polarity of opinions about them, i.e. positive vs. negative, sufferers vs. perpetrators, humanized vs. militarized, etc., but research on migrant's self-narrative is to a great extent a recent attempt where certain refugee narratives, a few novels by migrant authors, and self-representation through selfies (Chouliaraki, 2017) are an exception.

In the aforementioned context, the researchers focused on the self-narrative of migrants. In this regard, the art work of 25 years old Afghan visual artist, Aziz Hazara was selected to unravel the nuances of migrant discourse. During his Bachelors in Fine Arts (2013-2017), in a Lahore-based institution, Hazara displayed his final year visual-project which centered on the migration theme in particular and migration as an existential issue in general. He had been studying in Pakistan when the war took place (2013-14) in Afghanistan. When he went back to his homeland in summer break, he was flabbergasted to see changed topology of Kabul. Most of his friends and their families he had been brought up with were gone to become refugees in other countries such as Europe, America and Australia. "Kabul for me was an empty city at that time", he sighed in a personal interview with the principal researcher.

In order to measure the intensity of the Afghan migrant situation, Hazara visited different refugee camps in Pakistan. Emotionally persecuted by the poor condition of his fellow countrymen, he set out to find answers to the questions such as "Why is it us (the East) who are suffering and forced to migrate towards them (the West), and "Is there someone/something which is forced to migrate from West-to-East". The answer came naturally in the form of "the second hand toys" sold in the flea market. He visited the place and 'met' with many toys as he put it. While observing their physical appearance closely, he witnessed the way they had been shelved and arranged. His mind weaved an association that further augmented his understanding of the Afghan migrants'

dilemma: “I felt somehow these toys have similarities with migrants [...]. They are carrying their memories and marks they have with them to other places”, asserted Hazara. He bought them, photographed them and through them he constructed the migrant identity with an aim to “build layers upon everyday imagery”.

The visual artist, Hazara, in this artistic attempt presented a visual discursive representation of migrants. Machin (2013) asserts that discourse (the text-in-context) can also be “communicated [...] in the social and material culture of everyday life such as fashion, toys, music, architecture, and town planning.” (p. 347). Critical Discourse Analysts not only focus on the ways power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced or legitimized by the discourse but also how they are resisted through text and talk in the socio-political context (van Dijk, 2001, p.352). Therefore, in the photographic representation of the toys-as-migrants, multiple meanings are produced with the help of underlying grammar of the visual communication, the syntax of images, and several other elements such as images, colour, gaze, positioning, background, etc. There is a whole new world of complex ideas and meanings packed in these images which needs to be explored, understood and expressed.

### Research Questions

From the foregoing, this study attempts to highlight how the migrant identity has been constructed and portrayed in the photographs of toys. It addresses the following research questions:

- a. What type of discourse lies underneath the analogy of toys and migrants?
- b. How is the migrant identity constructed and subsequently relayed in the selected photographs.

### The Significance of the Study

The current study is significant since the issue of migrants and migration is both topical and challenging due to the unprecedented levels of displacement happening in the world today. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that over 65 million people have been forced to migrate from their homelands. A report “Changing the narrative: Media representation of refugees and migrants in Europe” also stressed on the role of migrant’s portrayal for better integration to host countries. They highlighted the need to “work together to change the narrative in Europe from “crisis” to “opportunity”, from “faceless floods” to individual people each with their own story, hopes and capacities” (World Association for Christian Communication, Europe, 2017).

The task under hand is to present a counter-narrative to the representation done by the ‘other’ that may otherwise remain invisible. It may be a means to voice those who mostly have been kept ‘silent’, who are considered either ‘vulnerable or dangerous’ (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017). Hence, this study will be helpful in highlighting the state of the migrants through visual discourse analysis, while questioning the established notion of ‘carrier of crises’ associated with the migrants.

### Review of Literature

We find a number of studies encompassing the discursive construction of the migrants and refugees by the media (Boeva, 2016; Ukmar, 2017; Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017; Chouliaraki, L., 2017). The available studies are divided into two sections: a) The representation of migrants on the Media, b) Self-representation of migrants.

#### The Media Representation of Migrants

Boeva (2016) applied CDA on the data collected from both British and American conservative and liberal sources, i.e., *The Daily Mail*, *The Guardian*, *FOX News*, *ABC News*. They searched the terms such as “refugee”, “migrant”, “asylum”, “crisis” and found that in September 2015 migrants’ identity was constructed in a more positive manner than how it had been done previously. They were portrayed as “someone who need[ed] help, support and assistance rather than an enormous group of perpetrators coming to steal Europeans’ jobs” (p. 57).

Ukmar (2017) explored the migrant’s visual portrayal in German and British newspapers in the context of ‘European Refugee crisis’ in 2016 using iconographic-iconologic image framework. The visual autoethnography disclosed that the German newspaper had portrayed migrants more positively by emphasizing their integration into the host country whereas the British newspaper presented them as hostile as well as partially criminal. The researcher also confessed his auto-ethnographical portrayal as influenced by the contemporary media trends where the ‘frame of victimization’ (p. 49) remained predominant, hence emphasizing the need for alternative readings.

Chouliaraki and Zaborowski (2017) investigated migrants’ representation in 1200 news articles across eight European countries through content analysis reflecting on “whether, and how refugees ‘speak’ (in metaphorical terms) in the news”, revealing that the linguistic-practices employed for migrants, ‘bordered’ their voice instead of providing them with a public-space to express themselves. A hierarchy of voice in the projection of migrants’ voice and their misrepresentation at multiple levels were divulged, out-grouping them from the “communities of

belonging” (p. 613). Another study by Georgiou & Zaborowski (2017) asserts that there is a gradual shift from a compassionate response to doubt, distrust and even hostility towards the migrants as “voiceless others”. They also highlight the discourse of violence vs. discourses of pity and vulnerability as presented through the East and West media.

### **Self-Representation of Migrants**

Self-representation of migrants is not prolific yet may be traced in different types of discourse. In one such short story “We Disappear in Flight”, a prominent Afghan writer Mohammad Asef Soltanzadeh narrates the story of a young Afghan refugee who is afraid of meeting any acquaintance or receiving a call by someone fearing that something horrible may be announced. In order to save himself from the pain of subjecting to harsh news from home, he started avoiding any such physical or virtual encounter. However, since it was impossible to remain detached, he started “losing his mind” under the immensity of realities shared with him from different quarters. The story depicts the emotional trauma of around 2.5 million Afghan refugees where distancing comes at the cost the loss of identity. Other prominent diaspora literature also focuses on the terrors of war, migration and the pitiful life conditions of refugees away from their homeland. One such aesthetic attempt has been recently made by Khaled Hosseini, an Afghan British diaspora writer, who through his visually poignant poetic rendering of Syrian refugees in *Sea Prayer* (2018) reflects upon the painful journey undertaken by thousands of refugees around the world.

Chouliaraki, L. (2017) considers the photographs of migrants taking their selfies as a “digital trace of self-representation” (p. 3). These self-representations give rise to ambivalent public responses characterized by sympathy and suspicion regarding both the migrants (what is the reason behind migrants taking selfies?/ should they take selfies?) and the authorities (are authorities’ decisions about migrants right or wrong?).

The scarcity of afore-mentioned research highlights the need for the projection of counter-narratives as compared to the fixed-image portrayals of the migrants. In the context of Afghan migration no discourse has been formed up till now to reflect their situation, which indicates a substantial gap in the literature.

### **Methodology**

#### **The Corpus**

The corpus for the current study comes from Afghan visual artist Aziz Hazara’s visual project displayed in Lahore comprising eighteen photographs out of which five have been selected for the detailed analysis. The photographs have been accessed with the artist’s consent.

#### **Theoretical Model**

The study adopts Machin’s Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (2013) as an instrument to critically analyse the visual discourse, i.e. the photographs of toys from the flea market, along with the identity toolkit suggested by Gee (2000) to highlight the objectified migrant identity.

Machin believes that discourses can be communicated through every day material objects such as toys by using different semiotic resources and modes. Sometimes these discourses are considered as petty objects of everyday life, yet as discourse they are shaped by certain ideologies and power. They enact and legitimate power relations as well as counter them. The toys in the photographs are from the flea market, used, deformed, and made to migrate, yet much is communicated through them. Toys as puppets are handled without their own will. They do not need passport or visa in order to cross borders and are fortunate for not requiring identity cards according to the host country laws. Toys even from flea markets have some re-sale value as compared to the migrants makes the analogy even more painfully meaningful.

The context of the visual discourse reveals a long history of Afghan war leading to the struggle of Afghans. There had been large scale mix migrations along the Western Balkan route (International Organization for Migration, 2018) which resulted into the saturation of victimized and helpless migrant images across the media platforms. The poverty they live in, the perpetual economic and social insecurity, the continuous displacement, social exclusion, indiscriminate, violent extremism, etc., is what builds the co-text to the current discourse of migrant representation which equally forms the contemporary context too (World Migration Report, 2018). Despite multiple endeavours for the betterment at different levels and by different organizations, there is still a long way to go.

The primary researcher also interviewed the visual artist, Aziz Hazara, to trace the relationship between the photographs, the artists and the conditions in which the discourse was produced. Although Hazara talks about toys from the flea market as migrants, he does not categorically relate them to Afghan or any other migrants, rather he labels the very phenomenon of migration as an existential problem. He does not give any particular background to

the images probably to highlight the universality of the phenomenon. However, while addressing one interview question, he confessed that the inspiration for the project came from the then prevalent conditions and his visits to the refugee camps: "I was deeply shocked what I felt in Kabul, so I started researching on migration", stated Aziz. In this scenario the very idea of the photographic representation of the toys as migrants is both a product of the visual artist's imagination as well as a contiguous condition.

The aforementioned factors such as Hazara's experience of migration, his connection with the refugees, visits to refugee camps in person and the idea of displacement recurring in his own life lay at the heart of the construction of the objectified migrant identity (OMI). When seen in the wider context of Afghan war, the projection of these toys as migrants impart even more meaning to the photographs. It will be fair to assign the visual artist the status of an 'ethnographer-photographer', as he lived with the toys, felt their pain, experienced their emotions and eventually framed them.

The dirty and shabbily clothed toys in the photographs show marks and smudges on their faces attesting to their excessive use. Most of them, with an exception of few plastic toys, are stuffed with fabric and cotton that further accentuates their vulnerability due to the cheap and delicate nature of their material reality. Because of their material fragility and inherited flaccidity they are easy to acquire whatever shape they have been turned into. Plastic too conveys 'cheapness' (Abousnoug & Machin, 2013), signifying the less-to-none demand of the migrants. The projected toys have been both humanized and animalized, in accordance with the specific traits and characteristics that their condition and status allows them. In the following section, the analysis of each photograph has been done on the basis of its colour, positioning, background, graphics, emotions, body gesture, facial expressions, gaze, etc.

In the family portrait (Image-1), the members are shown as poorly clad. Even the innermost covering which is now the outermost is full of marks attesting to poverty and lack of resources. Because of the inherent sense of insecurity, the child in the family is positioned in front of his father; whereas in a studio arranged family portraits children are mostly placed in the middle. The father, although, equally incapable of exercising any power, as the head of the family feels it to be his duty to protect his child. Ironically the expanse of child's arm, which aims at treasuring the existing family, does not conform to the surrounding conditions. New female toys usually have rosy cheeks but here we find a scar replacing the blush on.

The close-up image of the defaced toy (Image-2) communicates pain, torture, suffering, and mutilation. The missing upper part of the head reflects the intellectual deprivation which has become the future of the migrants. Reminiscent of the Syrian migrant child, Alan Kurdi whose corpse was found out on the Turkish beach, the absence of brain can be equated with the absence of life or future that is snuffed before it could materialize. Most of the toys are photographed by the artist with their tags as identity cards, but in case of this photograph, the identity card is missing. The media was able to trace and hence name the washed up child, but the visual artist remained unsuccessful in his attempt of finding her identity card. In *Strangers at Our Door* (1995), Bauman while weaving a discourse about 'strangerhood' of refugees, reveals the unstable and blurred identities that become emblematic of the reality of a stranger from outside. Uprooted and displaced, the Afghan migrants face an identity dilemma no less than what Bauman asseverates.

The girl toy in the photograph (Image-3) is beautiful with vibrant eyes and sensual smile although there are smudges on her face. She seems full of life with hair styled up according to her available resources. Despite her shinning eyes and chubby cheeks, her façade indicates the theme of nakedness since her dress is stripped off which hints towards sexual abuse. According to UNHCR report (2018), many refugees in the camps have reported themselves as targets of sexual abuse. Claude Moraes (the chair of the European parliament justice and home affairs committee) confessed that the number of child abuse and rape case is horrendously growing (Neslen, 2017). Compared to the identity bankruptcy of Image-2, this image reflects identity desecration.

The smiling baby toy (Image-4) seems oblivious of his condition. The skin from his eye lid-a very sensitive area of body is peeled off as if indicating the shredding of secure future. The peach-tinged-orange colour is regarded as friendly and enthusiastic, so is the baby toy giving a message of friendship across the globe. However the umbilicus or naval focused in the image indicates the sense of up-rootedness and the loosening of relationships. It conveys a sense of displacement too.

The visual discourse (Image-5) constructs an insecure migrant identity, where the toy has almost closed his eyes with repulsion, hatred or pain. He does not want to face the harsh realities of the world. He seems equally defensive, trying to protect himself from some unseen attack. The facial expressions and emotions of fear depicted in the image are rare for toys and hence disturbing.

Through MCDA, the visual discourse has been done in the above section and themes of deformity, lack of resources, uprootedness, fear, suffering, pain, insecurity, etc. have been made apparent. It is important to mention that not every toy in the flea market is deformed or shabby, so the selection of the toys for the project may have been the outcome of the emotional affiliations of the artist. The sample photographs not only reflect the socio-culturally and historically constructed patterns, but also reproduce such constructs (Dogan, 2005). Although they

refer to an existential issue broadly, as claimed by Hazara, the analysis of these photographs only through global or existential perspectives lemmatizes their interpretation that takes strength from socio-cultural and political realities.

### **Objectified Migrant Identity**

Identity, as a concept, has been explored, investigated, and interpreted in a multiple ways (Vignoles, Schwartz & Luyckx, 2011). It is considered a finest tool to analyse participants in order to have deeper understanding of their perceptions, worldviews, experiences, characteristics, values and circumstances, in short to know “what happens with, for and to people in given contexts” (Johnston, 2012, p.3; Gee, 2000). Identity has been studied in multiple contexts e.g. self, social, cultural, situational, political, national, etc. Phinny & Baldelomar (2011) state that identity is never context-free so the “person-context interaction” (Ferrer-Werder et al. 2012, p. 64) plays a crucial role in identity construction. In the context of migration, La Barbera (2015) defines identity as “the result of the negotiation of personal given conditions, social context, relationships, and institutional frameworks” (p. 3). She argues that identity is a “relational and contextual” process which reflects how individuals and groups consider, construct and position themselves in relation to others according to social categories such as gender, sexuality, culture, race, nation, age, class, and occupation. There are several markers which act as a means to externalize multiple identities the individuals endorse such as linguistic items, dressing, and positioning in the image, etc.

Identity in the current study, from a social constructionist view, means a process that draws on historical, cultural, social, (Kroger, 2007; Barbera, 2015) emotional and biological influences simultaneously. The individual identities of the toys further intersect and build a collective group identity. Eliassi (2013) argues that through discourse, migrants construct an identity. The process changes according to migrant’s socio-historical position, language and day to day practices as well as the hostilities they face in their life. Similarly, each toy has its own experience, its own history, its own story and hence its own identity. They are very different from each other in their outward appearance, having different identity marks, yet very similar in many respects because of the common inheritance of misery, deformity, suffering, etc. in which each toys apparently seems entrenched.

Gee (1999), in defining the ways in which discourse constructs identity, acknowledged this socio-cultural aspect, highlighting the “personal, social and cultural knowledge, feelings, values, identities and relationships relevant in the interaction” (p. 83). Identity as suggested by Gee (2000) is tied up with four socio-personal domains: Nature-Identity (which is a state developed from the forces in nature), Institution-Identity (a position authorized by authorities within institutions), Discourse-Identity: (an individual recognized in the discourse/of/with “rational” individuals trait dialogue), and Affinity-Identity: (experiences shared in the practice of “affinity groups”) (2000, p. 3). With a similar approach, Fairclough (2001) constructs diverse levels of social organization: the social situation, environment, and institution (pp. 20-21). These levels are interlinked with what Gee (2010) suggests as the ways of knowing identity which are traced in the following as a means to investigate OMI.

### **Nature-Identity (N-I)**

The N-I of each toy is evident through its physical appearance. The toys were not crippled and deformed inherently or had scars of mutilation and marks of poverty by birth. The N-I in the current study, however, should not be confused with the essentialist’s idea of direct relevance between identity and biological factors or social categorization. In this case, the deformity of appearance is under the process of reconstruction of N-I. The current identity of toys reveals a marked contrast with their manufactured identity (M-I). This identity is socially-conditioned but now it is the reconstructed N-I as well, though not inherently carried about by them. The migrants’ N-I may be reconstructed similarly according to their physical conditions, due to harsh weather and other circumstances such as war.

### **Institution-Identity (I-I)**

I-I deals with one’s position in the society. Toys from the flea-market have very low position in the society. For toys this belonging to the flea-market is not their N-I, rather something assigned to them by the socio-economic institutions. Similarly migrants are not inherently “Migrants”, they acquire this label under the hold of host country institutions or prevalent global conditions. The label ‘migrant’ is their I-I. Since ‘Identity’ is constructed at many levels – individual, social, national, and historical – the migrants are also given I-I labels such as ‘migrants’, ‘refugees’, ‘terrorists’, ‘different’, ‘other’, etc.

### Discourse-Identity (D-I)

This aspect of identity is determined by the individual accomplishments and is known by participants in their social interactions. Different identities overlap and gain weight in relation to each other. Migrants too could be adventurous, curious, ambitious, cooperative and eager to move forward in their life. So, they should not be victimized generally as a group by imposing certain kind of identity upon them institutionally. It should also be noted that mostly migrants are not given the liberty to represent themselves; resultantly, the representation or identity of migrants is either fixed or polarized. Several studies on migrants' identities have been undertaken with the view that their identities are not frozen rather fluid, underscoring the role of discourse through which they find ways to both conform to and resist the wider social account of who they are (e.g., Guillem, 2015). As people can construct their identity through discourse and dialogues, the artist seems to frame the migrant identity through visual discourse.

### Affinity-Identity (A-I)

We are what we are because of the experience we have within certain affinity groups. Again migrants in addition to their own individual traits are also recognized through their membership with different groups, where an individual member irrespective of his/her positive individual traits will also be identified and recognized through the group affiliations and traits. Although group acts as a symbol of solidarity, here an individual migrant is mostly at loss.

The analysis shows that migrants are mostly disempowered through their identity construction, as their N-I is deformed and tortured, their I-I is imposed on them through institutional forces, their D-I is not allowed to construct distinctively, and the A-I is rather fixed through misrepresentation largely by the media. There is a need to give migrants a space; to allow them to construct their own identities. If at one point in time, their identity is distorted, it may change later as it is not fixed and socially conditioned. The media, however, only shows the shadowy images of the migrants (Image- 6 & 7 Random) thus wiping out their individual identities and creating a collective identity group to be feared by the host countries (Wodak, 2016).

### Artist/Author-Identity

After the analysis, the researchers found that another identity category can be included within the parameters of Gee's Identity toolkit which seems to be woven throughout the fabric of images and in their selection. Gee (2010) claims that people construct diverse identities for themselves through discourse. Sometimes these identities are constructed for other people, which resultantly end in constructing their own pictures. Hence, the visual discourse by constructing the migrant's identity, in turn constructs the artists' own identity. Even the topic of words, the use of imagery or the structure of discourse gives insight into the artists' identity.

### Conclusion

The self-represented visual discourse through the lens of an Afghan visual artist is significant in the cotemporary context. The researchers positioned the visual discourse in its historical and socio-cultural context thus analyzing it in the light of earlier representations as well as recent context of both the artist and the discourse. MCDA helped to unveil the hidden discourse underneath the analogy of toys from the flea market with the migrants. Gee's identity toolkit helped to portray and subsequently relay OMI. The findings reveal that a narrative of association between toys and migrants has been constructed which evokes the themes of deformity, subversion, discontentment, lack of resources, up-rootedness, fear, low social status, and insecurity, etc. The toys seem to ventrilocate the migrants as victims. Similarly as Ukmar (2017) pointed out, the visual artist also seems to be influenced by the contemporary media representation of migrants. The self-representation in the current study was done via the visual artist; however some actual images of migrants through their own lens may be studied for future research.



Image: 1



Image-2



**Image: 3**



**Image: 4**



**Image: 5**



**Image: 6 (Random)**



**Image: 7 (Random)**

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